

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**THE U.S. AND SOUTH ASIA:  
PARTNERS OF CONVENIENCE; GLOBAL NEIGHBORS OF NECESSITY**

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South Asia is so vast, so varied and so complex that it repels would-be geopolitical strategists. Its sheer dimensions are intimidating: nearly one billion souls in India alone, dozens of languages and thousands of dialects, demographic growth rates that are a Malthusian's nightmare, and ethnic conflicts and political disputes as convoluted and unyielding as can be found anywhere in the world. The subcontinent defies rational analysis. One is continually reminded of the parable of the blind men and the elephant: the dimensions are so grand that one can focus only on the element at hand. For some, South Asia is perceived to be a cesspool of teeming humanity laden with colonial burdens, its infrastructure broken-down, primitive or non-existent. It is a dangerous place, the naturalist world of Rudyard Kipling gone awry, polluted, chaotic and violent, in short, unmanageable. And yet this geopolitical pachyderm has carried a rich, varied and dynamic civilization on its back for more than 4000 years. It is home to the world's largest democracy and a high-tech province that some predict will become the computer software capital of the world in the coming decade. It is a region that indigenously has produced nuclear weapons capability and sophisticated missile and satellite systems. It is also an important commercial partner for the United States, with more than \$12 billion in two-way trade in 1996. In short, the subcontinent defies categorization, but it cannot be ignored. What happens in this region is important to long-range U.S. interests.

At the same time, it cannot be argued that South Asia presently is of vital importance to the United States in classic geopolitical terms. Its significance during the Cold War era was that of superpower pawn (perhaps less so for India, inasmuch as it hewed to the Non-aligned credo). Now that the Cold War has ended, the United States must focus on those

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transnational issues having the potential to affect our economic prosperity and the need for U S entanglement in dangerous regional disputes of a potentially nuclear nature We should focus, as the Russians have chided us for not doing, on playing regional chess rather than attempting to quarterback or – worse – serve as the running back or defensive line for a football game that someone else has called Rather we should focus our efforts on influencing and guiding the concerned parties into a strategic tie, if necessary, while keeping our own pieces off the chessboard Much of that influence can be diplomatic or largely symbolic, some would be more practical, such as training and international exchange programs For the purposes of this exercise, this paper will focus on the two major regional players, India and Pakistan, their interests and policy goals, the threats and challenges that confront them, and how U S policy goals and objectives intersect

### India – The Enduring Enigma

Perhaps the most salient, if not overwhelming, feature about India is its sheer demographic size and variety, nearly one-fifth of the world's population in a land mass two-thirds the size of the continental U S This, in the words of at least one prominent economist who specializes in the region, is a population "time bomb " In an earlier age, prior to the emergence of Wilsonian principles of nationhood, the United Nations and a generally accepted notion that states should respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of other states, demographic expansion expressed itself – or sought a safety valve – in colonial expansion, *cf* the British Empire In modern times such expansion tends to translate into intra-communal strife in a struggle for scarce resources For India, managing this growth is further complicated by the inherently messy and inefficient nature of India's genuine

democracy – proudly and rightly touted as the world’s largest – together with an inefficient economy burdened both by red tape and a caste system which complicates free market norms by restricting certain members to certain sectors, high rates of illiteracy (nearly 48%) and the fact that nearly one-half of the population already lives in poverty India has turned to technology and its talented and large pool of engineers and scientists to address problems of scarcity both in agriculture and in energy, leading in the latter case to the development of nuclear weapons capability

In fact, India’s urge to project power within the region, and indeed globally, in terms of influence, may be seen as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century equivalent of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century’s quest for markets and raw materials by European nations at similar stages in their demographic development One could argue that India’s stance toward Pakistan *vis-à-vis* Kashmir and its nuclear arms capability is also driven largely by demographic pressures at home, despite the enormous drain on the economy associated with maintaining troop deployments So for India, vital and important interests translate into addressing the needs of a billion Indian citizens by maintaining internal security, providing economic opportunity through increased ties to the U S , Europe and Asia Pacific, developing human resources through education and health programs, and protecting her regional sovereignty while preventing the ability of another regional hegemon, such as China, to restrict India’s opportunities for economic expansion and political influence

India must pursue these interests in the face of threats from within and without Significant portions of India’s external land borders remain disputed Kashmir remains a flash point for yet a fourth war with Pakistan, one made all the more threatening to regional

security by both parties' nuclear capabilities India views Pakistan as the instigator at worst - cheerleader at best -- of civil insurrection in Kashmir as well as among its Sikh minority in the Punjab region bordering Pakistan India also continues to wrestle with a contentious populace in its North East territory, where it must maintain significant troop presence India's massive population is a threat to stability, given the limited opportunities for economic growth and the resultant fissures along ethnic lines as struggles ensue for scarce resources India's lively democracy opens the door to ethnic division within Its Hindu majority, feeling itself under threat, increasingly casts its lot with the rising nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), rather than with the pluralistic but too-long entrenched and corrupt Constitution Party which has ruled India without serious competition for the past 50 years since independence Finally, a nuclear China, friendly to enemy Pakistan, looms just over the horizon, with its own burgeoning population and desire for regional hegemony, not to mention attractive force for foreign investment given its relative authoritarian order China's gain will be India's loss, from Delhi's perspective The presence of these hostile forces in the regional neighborhood, India argues, requires that it maintain its nuclear capability

#### Pakistan – The Country That Isn't India

Pakistan has defined itself from its inception in 1947 in opposition to India, both its mother and its fraternal twin This has led to behaviors in the political realm that only Freud would understand Whereas India was largely Hindu and secular, Pakistan saw itself as a protectorate for Indian Muslims, certain to suffer discrimination once the British umbrella was withdrawn Unfortunately, while pursuing an economic program that has resulted in

solid annual growth and openings for investment – in fact doing much better in this regard than India – Pakistan, despite its confessional homogeneity, has not been able to duplicate India's successful model of largely uninterrupted democratic governance. Instead, Pakistan has veered back and forth between civilian and military governments, being ruled for at least half of its 50 years by the military, albeit with a large degree of responsibility and moderation. This inherent instability may or may not invite or exacerbate other crisis situations, e.g. territorial conflicts with India, what is certain is that it does not provide the institutional stability or democratic outlets for dealing with some of Pakistan's core domestic challenges. Pakistan greets the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with a demographic explosion, projected to increase its current 136 million souls to approximately 357 million by the year 2050. This human burden, in a country with illiteracy rates hovering around 40% and already suffering from serious internal conflict between its indigenous population and better-educated *mohajirs*, or those Muslim refugees who came from India at the time of partition, will confront energy-scarce Pakistan with enormous challenges. Karachi is already an ungovernable cauldron of crime, corruption and violence. Indeed, the potential for political implosion is not entirely theoretical.

In lieu of democratic reforms, and absent a vision of its own intrinsic future, Pakistan has sought to create a sense of identity through its support for causes, whether the Muslim majority in Kashmir or the pre-Taliban *mujaheddin* in Afghanistan following the invasion of the former Soviet Union. This latter effort gained Pakistan the support, both political and material, of the United States, thus giving it the upper hand in its competition with India. Although U.S. assistance to Pakistan has waned with the collapse of the Soviet

Union and the shift in focus on non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Pakistan has continued to support a U S agenda, whether through participation in the Gulf War coalition or as an active participant in UN peacekeeping, hoping thereby to restore its primacy in U S eyes, primacy, that is, over India. Indeed, Pakistan has volunteered that it would be only too willing to accede to international non-proliferation treaties endorsed by the United States were it not for Indian intransigence.

Meanwhile, the government in Islamabad finds that it suits its domestic political needs to maintain an active posture on Kashmir, inviting UN mediation, while aiding and abetting insurgent groups active in Kashmir and India's Punjab (Sikh) province. Its capable and ever-ready military ("when your only tool is a hammer, you tend to treat everything as though it were a nail") continues to consume nearly 6.8% of annual GDP, providing security along Pakistan's many borders. After all, its leaders will point out, Pakistan is surrounded by a difficult India, a huge China, a problematic Afghanistan and a potentially pesky Iran. Pakistan's interests are, therefore, to maintain its territorial integrity and security, both internal and external, to continue to grow economically, attracting investment, improving infrastructure and maintaining stable relations with the U S and its energy suppliers and fellow Muslims – Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States while opening new markets, and building stable institutions that can meet the needs of its populace. The threats to these interests include the potential for war over Kashmir, internal ethnic conflict, unfettered demographic growth, political or revolutionary Islam as a substitute for governmental institutions, emanating from Afghanistan and possibly Iran, and drug trafficking and addiction resulting from the Afghanistan war.



### The United States The Reluctant Suitor

The U.S. has never had direct "vital" interests in either Pakistan or India. Rather, we have dealt with both countries on the basis of larger regional interests. During the Cold War, India spurned U.S. advances. The U.S. relationship with Pakistan evolved not out of a sense of shared values but rather out of a pragmatic need to use Pakistan as a staging ground for U.S.-supplied resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Ironically, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resultant international dependence on the U.S. as "sole superpower" to provide security when needed -- or at very least to provide the leadership needed to garner international support for regional disasters -- has increased U.S. interest in preventing war and fostering regional stability. In this sense, India and Pakistan move up a notch on the U.S. list of interests, given their unguarded nuclear capability, the very real if remote potential for irresponsible use of nuclear confrontation over Kashmir, and the impact this would have on proliferation concerns worldwide (when observers determine, for example, that there was a definite winner and this did not mean the end of the world) -- not vital, perhaps, but extremely important to U.S. efforts to prevent WMD proliferation. The U.S. also has an economic interest in developing new markets in South Asia through improved infrastructure and expanding economic reforms. And given the globalization of everything from legitimate business to crime to drugs and environmental decay, the U.S. also has an interest in addressing those areas of concern before they reach American's borders. Finally, the U.S. has an interest in developing stable societies through the proliferation of democratic ideals and adherence to human rights.

Tied to these interests, U S policy objectives are, in order of priority, to prevent the proliferation and delivery of WMD, to promote regional stability (with an obvious interest in defusing the tensions over Kashmir, this does not equate, however, to U S mediation of the dispute), to expand exports, support economic growth and promote sustainable development, to fight against international terrorism and prevent the spread of crime and narcotics trafficking, to support democracy and human rights, and to improve the global environment. stabilize population growth and protect human health The U S has a particular interest in buttressing Pakistan as a moderate, relatively democratic Islamic state, given its neighbors

Where Do They Go From Here? (Possible 10 - Year Scenarios)

If one removes the seemingly psychological, fratricidal dimension of the relationship between these two South Asian players, their policy objectives are somewhat analogous Addressing the demands of their enormous populations through economic growth and improved literacy is, for both countries, an unavoidable priority Both countries must seek, therefore, to expand their trade ties (although India has much further to go in adjusting to an export-oriented market and decentralization) and to improve infrastructure and liberalize financial systems Both have an interest in maintaining internal security, and both recognize that they can focus on their economic growth only to the degree that they can resolve outstanding territorial and ethnic disputes But this is where objective analysis and criteria end, and the potential for conflict takes over India seeks to project power, commensurate with her size and technological capabilities, and consequently desires a permanent seat on the Security Council Pakistan seeks renewed close ties with the United States, China and regional co-confessional Iran to balance India's ambitions India seeks to

isolate Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir. Pakistan seeks to force an international solution to the “Kashmir problem.” Both sides cling tightly to their nuclear capability, while refusing to bring it under international oversight. India has sophisticated missile delivery systems. Both have mighty militaries, capable of inflicting serious damage. Neither has exceptional intelligence gathering capabilities. Fortunately, neither has a great desire to engage in war, but the potential is nonetheless present. Thus, the following possible scenarios present themselves.

#### Best-Case, Less Than 20% Probability

- Kashmir issue resolved, no state-sponsored/supported insurgencies
- Stabilized population growth (<2.0) for both
- India a regional power, stable secular democracy
- Pakistan stable, united and engaged in democratic institution building
- NPT signed and adhered to by both
- China non-threatening
- Economic growth at 6% plus, investment proceeding apace
- Demilitarization, at least as percentage of GDP
- Enhanced regional cooperation, via South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

#### Most Likely, More Than 70% Probability

- Bilateral/Trilateral (U.S.-India-Pakistan) MOU on WMD
- Both retain capability to deliver WMD throughout Asia
- Populations burgeoning, although reduced growth in India
- Kashmir dispute ongoing, low-level border skirmishes continue
- Another military crackdown in Pakistan (*muhajirs*), Karachi a “free zone”
- Infrastructure still incapable of supporting significant economic growth
- China strong and competitive
- India has permanent seat on UN Security Council
- Limited investment

#### Worst-Case, Less Than 10% Probability

- War over Kashmir, possibly nuclear
- Insurgency (political Islam) and terrorism rampant in Pakistan, crime

- Ethnic insurgency and unrest in India, result of demographic pressure
- Imposition of martial law, temporarily, in India
- Military government in Pakistan
- Negative economic growth
- Massive refugee flows from Pakistan to India
- Pakistan implodes

### Where Does the U S Fit In?

The U S has limited means of influencing India and Pakistan, which is probably just as well since the only viable solutions to their problems are likely to be indigenous solutions. The current U S posture has been to increase visibility through high-level visits, to continue to press on adherence to the NPT and other arms control regimes, to continue to support Pakistan as a buttress against political Islamic extremists (despite a recalcitrant Congress), to encourage investment and economic reform, to signal that a permanent UNSC seat for India might be considered, and to avoid direct involvement in the dispute over Kashmir. Largely as a result of Congressional pressure, the U S has also continued to assign human rights concerns a prominent place on the bilateral agenda with both countries.

The U S should continue to maintain WMD and missile control regime concerns at the top of its security agenda, while acknowledging the positions of the regional parties. Rather than pressing for NPT accession, however, something the U S has not done in the case of Israel in recognition of its security concerns, the U S should consider separate bilateral arrangements or a possible trilateral MOU with the parties that would satisfy our concerns for safeguards. In return, the U S should engage in intelligence and/or technology sharing that permits the establishment of a secure "command and control" regime on both

sides. By holding out the possibility of a permanent seat in the UNSC to India, the U S could effectively co-opt that country's hegemonic ambitions and effectively harness her nuclear behavior (although the Kashmir problem might still remain a barrier to this line of action). With respect to Kashmir, the U S should encourage peaceful resolution of the dispute without getting involved in the particulars of this impossible situation. This is one dilemma where attrition and cost may determine results in the long run, e.g. an Indian military drawdown followed by a Pakistani assault which is defeated by independently-minded Kashmiris. The U S should continue to support Pakistan as a moderate Islamic state, and one of potential future use in a U S rapprochement with Iran. At the same time, the U S must accord India its due as an important source of economic and political stability in the region. The U S should continue joint military training and assistance with both countries, including IMET programs, and should encourage continued participation in UN peacekeeping missions. The U S should continue to encourage private investment in both countries, in tandem with ongoing economic reforms. Trade policy should be de-linked from issues of WMD and human rights, except for those areas of immediate and direct application (for example, the use of equipment for purposes of torture by Pakistani armed forces). While anti-terrorism and narcotics cooperation should continue in terms of intelligence sharing and legal cooperation, the U S should not expect Pakistan to solve U S drug-use problems through a heavy-handed interdiction program that risks creating domestic unrest. Finally, with regard to human rights, the U S should continue to be a "city shining on a hill," an exemplar to the rest of the world. While continuing to speak out on clear abuses and perceived injustices, via the State Department's Human Rights Report, it should not presume

to interpret other cultures' norms and impose standards, particularly as our own standards have evolved as a result of economic prosperity

In sum, the U S has long regarded the South Asian nations as partners of convenience when it suited our regional purposes and have otherwise maintained a healthy distance. While our interests in that region are not immediately vital, the potential impact of South Asian states, particularly giant India, on stability in an increasingly inter-related planet whose "sole super power" is increasingly resource-poor and over-tasked requires that we focus on long-term prospects for stability and security in the subcontinent. A relatively small investment now may pay off in long-term dividends.